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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER BALKENENDE OUT OF COMMISSION FOR SEVERAL MORE WEEKS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED. PLEASE HANDLE ACCORDINGLY.

1. (U) Prime Minister Balkenende has been in hospital since September 14 with a serious foot infection caused by streptococcal and staphylococcal bacteria. According to Government Information Service, Balkenende underwent two operations, and the wound is said to be healing well. Balkenende is now awaiting a skin-transplantation operation to cover the area that has been cut away, and the infection reportedly has been stopped. It is expected that he will be indisposed for at least another few weeks.

2. (SBU) Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Gerrit Zalm is acting Prime Minister, and has also taken over several of his EU Presidency responsibilities. As acting Prime Minister, Zalm will receive President Musharraf of Pakistan on September 27, and may chair the ASEM Summit in Hanoi on October 8-9, although that remains undecided. (It has also been suggested that Foreign Minister Bot or Luxembourg Prime Minister Junckers would fill the EU Presidency seat.) As Finance Minister, Zalm will attend the annual meeting of the World Bank and IMF on October 2-4. Because of Balkenende's indisposition, the visit by Russian Prime Minister Fradkov to The Hague planned for September 29 has been canceled. It is not yet known whether Balkenende will be able to receive Israeli Prime Minister Sharon on October 18, or whether the visit will be canceled.

3. (SBU) A member of Balkenende's staff (protect) told us recently that he may not return to work until late October. While his office believes he will be well enough to chair the EU Council meeting on November 5, they are not certain whether he will be able to travel to Rome on October 29 for the signing of the EU Constitutional Treaty.

4. (SBU) Balkenende's illness also comes at an awkward time domestically. He was unable to attend the traditional opening of Parliament by Queen Beatrix on September 21 -- the first time a sitting Prime Minister has failed to do so -- and will not be present to defend his government's budget in parliament this week. At a time when the cabinet's austerity program is sparking strikes and demonstrations in Rotterdam, Amsterdam and The Hague, and with one of his coalition partners (VVD) already in disarray, Balkenende's extended absence from public life cannot be helpful to a government whose long-term viability is already being questioned.

Sobel